

Watch and Learn in Signs: Interpreting signs in textile motifs for interior design application

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Abstract

This study examines the symbolic meanings of selected traditional textile patterns and their impact on visual and cultural qualities in interiors. Utilizing qualitative methods, the research highlights the interpretation of motifs, cultural contextualization, and the assessment of design relevance. The study explores how symbolic elements function as the role of motifs in cultural communication systems, and their implications for culturally informed interior design practice. Findings from the analysis emphasize the necessity for designers to engage in culturally informed practices that respect the origins and meanings of traditional motifs.

Keywords: Signs; Textile Motifs; Interior Design; Semiotics

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1.0 Introduction

The aesthetic value of textile design lies in the precision of its motifs and visually engaging patterns. Motifs serve as symbolic expressions of national identity, particularly in distinguishing one culture from another despite shared regional heritage. The selection of motifs shapes the overall appearance of textiles by reflecting cultural beliefs, environmental influences, values, and traditions of a community. This study aims to analyse the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional textile patterns and their impact on the visual and cultural quality of interior spaces. The objectives of this study are to interpret textile motifs using semiotic and cultural analysis, to identify the symbolic values embedded within the motifs, and to evaluate the suitability of textile motifs for interior design applications. The meticulous development of patterns throughout the textile-making process demonstrates the advanced knowledge and craftsmanship of local societies. Designers assign different names and forms to motifs based on creative preferences, and each motif is developed through methods such as denaturalization, stylization, abstraction, and geometric transformation. These approaches produce distinctive textile patterns enriched with cultural philosophies, symbolic interpretations, and meanings related to religion, customs, social norms, values, taboos, and local worldviews. Aspects of culture may be visually traced through traditional clothing, motif use, and colors (Jack & Hamidon, 2025). Motifs therefore hold strong symbolic value and function as visual indicators of national identity, distinguishing one culture from others with similar roots. Their selection communicates ideals connected to lifestyle, belief systems, the natural environment, and the cultural legacy of a community (Badaruddin et al., 2019). The complexity of pattern design reveals extensive cultural knowledge and skilled craftsmanship, with each motif reflecting individual creativity. Motifs are created through processes that include stylization,

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abstraction, denaturalization, and geometric adaptation, resulting in dominant and unique textile designs. Embedded within them are symbolic messages, philosophical values, and meanings that correspond to religious beliefs, cultural practices, norms, taboos, and lived experiences of the local community. As cultural development evolves, these ideas are preserved in textile traditions. Consequently, woven fabrics today are not only worn but also utilized in Malay rituals and ceremonial activities (Zainal et al., 2024).

Traditional motifs extend beyond decorative purposes, functioning as cultural symbols shaped by philosophy, social values, and collective identity. In many cultural contexts, they express worldviews related to nature, spirituality, fertility, protection, harmony, and social order. With the rise of contemporary interior design, however, understanding of these symbolic elements has diminished. Many designers incorporate motifs purely for aesthetic reasons without considering their cultural significance, which may lead to misunderstanding, cultural insensitivity, the loss of authenticity, or even misuse of sacred imagery. Therefore, accurate interpretation is essential before applying such motifs in interior-design practices. The research topic "Watch and Learn in Signs" highlights the need to observe and interpret symbolic motifs correctly before integrating them into interior design practices.

As global influences, commercial pressures, and modern trends reshape the use of traditional motifs, concerns emerge regarding the misreading of symbols, the dilution of authentic meanings, and the inappropriate use of culturally significant or sacred imagery. Interior decoration today may be approached through diverse stylistic choices modern, traditional, or contemporary based on design concepts and personal preferences. Contemporary textile design continues to preserve historical and cultural ideas. Blending modern styles with traditional motifs helps sustain their relevance for future products (UI Saba et al., 2023). Textile based products are now utilized widely in interior decorating across almost all design styles, including cushions, curtains, tablecloths, and other furnishings. The large variety available allows many possible combinations, enabling textiles to unify interior spaces and create aesthetic coherence. In modern times, interiors have evolved alongside changing tastes; patterns with unclear meanings remain popular because they are visually appealing and easy to use. Since traditional patterns are often mass-produced, ready-made designs are easily accessible and continue to attract interest. Searching for recurring elements and pattern systems becomes an enjoyable and engaging activity. Abduvoitovich and Mirzohid o'g'li (2025) further highlight that, aside from decorative value, patterns also convey symbolic significance. For instance, the selection of motifs for particular environments such as offices, hotels, children's rooms, or kitchens—may be influenced by colour schemes. Because of its complexity, the combination of pattern features should be examined carefully before making design decisions.



Fig. 1: An example of interior decoration that incorporates several local traditional textile motifs in the design of household equipment and ornaments
(Source: Hamdan Lias, 2017)

2.0 Literature Review

This study seeks to analyze the symbolic meanings of selected traditional textile motifs in relation to traditional attire, design, patterns, and motif symbolism within the cultural context of a specific society. The produced patterns are not merely decorative elements on cloth used to cover the body; rather, they serve as expressions of identity and symbolic representations of belief systems, social structures, and aesthetic values within a community (Rahman & Jamil, 2023). Previous studies have largely concentrated on general aspects of pattern in traditional attire; however, the present study examines motif meanings in traditional garments in relation to their potential application in interior decoration. Although existing studies discuss the influence of textile texture on indoor decoration from multiple aspects, such as texture features, color, patterns, cultural elements, and emotional impact, most research remains descriptive and fragmented. There is a lack of in-depth, systematic analysis that integrates semiotic and cultural interpretation with emotional and experiential responses, particularly in evaluating how textile textures inform interior design decision-making. Moreover, limited attention has been given to translating textile texture characteristics into structured design guidelines that can inspire and support interior adornment practices. In this study, attention is given to visual components such as patterns, design, symbolic meanings, and motifs embedded in textile patterns, as well as their connections to natural elements, spiritual beliefs, and societal perceptions. This approach is essential in exploring how cultural values are communicated non-verbally through textile art.

Therefore, this literature review not only aims to understand relevant theoretical frameworks but also to identify existing research gaps in studies related to design and cultural symbolism within interior decoration. Lungu et al. (2021) discuss how traditional cultural

expressions, such as weaving, textiles, and costumes, may be protected under copyright laws and industrial design regulations. Beyond legal protection, folklore must continue to develop naturally across generations, preserving cultural identity while allowing adaptation to support the continued sustainability of communities. In practical contexts, many symbolic signs may not be easily or accurately understood due to ineffective design or a lack of awareness regarding the intended meaning. Previous research has shown that combining symbols with text effectively enhances understanding. Hung and Tan (2024) state that the use of signs to convey information has become common in public areas and safety facilities. Although there is an established body of academic research on effective symbolic sign design within the field of ergonomics, these findings provide valuable insights for the design and display of signs in practical applications (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Interior ideas are now considered one of the most significant areas in design practice. As a result, the articulation of design concepts has become increasingly prominent. For example, the constructivist perspective of multiple realities and the pragmatic understanding of reality as constantly changing illustrate how interior concepts possess various acceptable definitions that evolve over time.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach as it enables an in-depth examination of the cultural meanings, symbolism, and aesthetic values embedded within textile motif design. It is using a qualitative-descriptive approach, and data is collected through observations, interviews, literature reviews, and visual documentation. The qualitative paradigm is considered most appropriate for this inquiry, given its capacity to explore social contexts, belief systems, and cultural identities that are not adequately captured through quantitative procedures. A research framework is therefore proposed to guide the cyclical and interpretive nature of qualitative investigation, supported by secondary sources that contribute to the conceptual foundation of the study. The qualitative methodology further facilitates the interpretation of meanings and cultural narratives inherent in traditional textile motifs. Rather than merely describing visual attributes, the study seeks to uncover symbolic functions, cultural significance, and contextual relevance, all of which require interpretive depth. Qualitative procedures therefore enable the researcher to examine symbolic messages conveyed by motifs, trace their cultural origins, and analyzes their potential translation into contemporary interior design. This approach also supports the generation of contextualized interpretations that incorporate the perspectives of cultural practitioners, artisans, and local communities, thus ensuring culturally grounded analysis of traditional artistic expressions and their contemporary relevance (Mlakar et al., 2025).

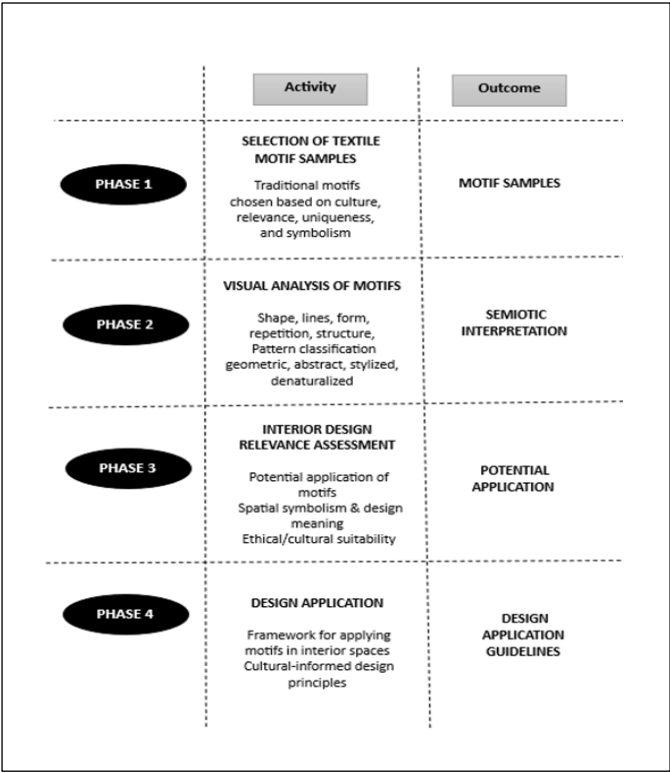


Fig. 2: Research Design
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

This study aims to understand and interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional textile motifs and to explain how these meanings may be applied in interior design contexts. To strengthen the study, the qualitative research design has been clearly stated,

which includes studying several motif samples in textile designs to provide a clear explanation in the analysis of symbols and signs in each motif studied. The scope and context of the study are clearly defined, along with the sampling strategy and criteria used to select textile motifs or internal cases. In addition, the data collection methods such as visual analysis, document analysis or expert interviews have been carried out in detail. The analytical framework, especially the application of semiotic and cultural analysis, is also clearly outlined, including the procedures used to interpret the data. Finally, this study explains the steps involved in data analysis and the steps taken to ensure the rigor and credibility of the research, thus increasing the transparency and reliability of the research design. Accordingly, a descriptive-interpretive research design is employed, as it enables the researcher to examine visual forms, symbolic representation, and cultural meanings in depth. This design is supported by several analytical strategies, including visual analysis of textile motifs in order to identify their structural and aesthetic features; semiotic analysis to interpret motifs as cultural signs carrying layered symbolic meanings; and contextual or cultural interpretation to relate motifs to belief systems, historical narratives, and social values. In addition, a comparative study of motifs is conducted to highlight similarities, differences, and thematic patterns that may inform their relevance and application in contemporary interior design. Data collection is conducted through multiple qualitative techniques. Document and artefact analysis involves the compilation of textile motif samples in the form of images, textile fragments, and museum or archival materials, which are examined to identify key design elements such as line, form, colour, pattern, and repetition. A review of relevant literature is undertaken to establish theoretical grounding and conceptual linkages concerning textile symbolism, cultural meaning, and the integration of traditional motifs within interior design practice. In addition, expert interviews with textile artisans, cultural practitioners, and interior designers may be conducted to obtain deeper insights into symbolic interpretation, cultural context, and appropriate design applications. Although optional, expert consultation offers substantial potential to strengthen interpretive depth and enhance the validity of the research findings. The analytical procedure used in this study is conceptually appropriate; however, the sampling and selection criteria were carried out on 20 sample motifs to identify each motif has its own meaning in each design. This study was also conducted by examining several traditional motifs that are always used in textile pattern designs.

This study is carried out through four main phases that systematically guide the research process from motif selection to design application. Phase 1 focuses on the selection of textile motif samples, whereby traditional motifs are chosen based on cultural relevance, uniqueness, and symbolic significance. This phase ensures that the motifs analysed are meaningful and representative of the cultural context under study, and results in the identification of suitable motif samples for further analysis. Phase 2 involves a detailed visual analysis of the selected motifs, examining their formal characteristics such as shape, lines, form, repetition, and structural arrangement. Motifs are also classified into categories including geometric, abstract, stylized or denaturalized patterns. The purpose of this phase is to decode the visual language embedded within each motif and to establish a foundation for semiotic interpretation. Phase 3 assesses the relevance of motif symbolism for interior design, where the potential application of motifs is evaluated in relation to spatial symbolism, aesthetic meaning, and ethical or cultural suitability. This step ensures that the integration of motifs into interior design is culturally informed and appropriate, ultimately identifying motifs with meaningful design potential. Finally, Phase 4 focuses on the application of motifs in interior contexts, resulting in the development of design guidelines and frameworks for applying traditional motifs in interior spaces. This includes proposing culturally informed design principles that support responsible motif usage while enhancing spatial identity and cultural expression. Together, these phases form a comprehensive methodology that links cultural interpretation with practical interior design application.

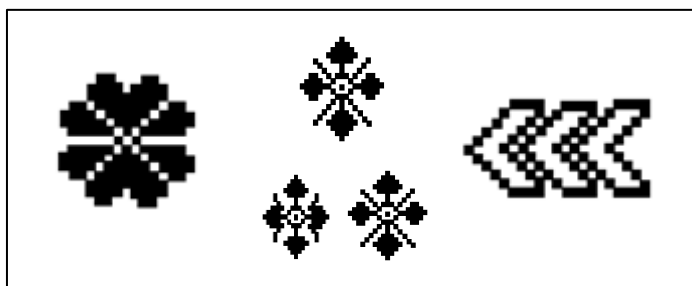


Fig. 3: Sample of motif in textiles
(Source: Ahmad, N.H 2020)

These are among the motifs found in textile fabrics that are used in creating patterns for interior decoration design found in homes today. The majority of motifs were discovered on cloths, as these motifs are fully decorated in Malay Traditional textiles. The Objects were classified into four categories: motifs such as geometric, animal, plant, and food. These categories represent the Malay community's efforts to draw inspiration from their surroundings. The majority of the meanings and interpretations of the signs or motifs on this cloth promote a positive outlook on daily living. For interior design applications, this technological shift raises important questions regarding cultural authenticity, symbolic interpretation, and the preservation of traditional narrative elements embedded in textile motifs. Therefore, while digital and AI-assisted techniques may expand creative possibilities, the cultural and symbolic value of traditional motifs must continue to guide design decisions in contemporary interior contexts (Jung, D., & Suh, S., 2024).

4.0 Findings

The findings of this study show that traditional textile motifs embody layered symbolic meanings that reflect cultural beliefs, spiritual values, and communal identity. Each motif contains symbolic elements that are deeply linked to the environment, worldview, and ancestral knowledge of the community. The analysis further reveals that motifs function as a cultural communication system in which meanings are conveyed visually through stylized forms, natural references, and symbolic patterns. This indicates that motifs should not be interpreted merely as decorative elements, but as visual signs that transmit cultural narratives across generations.

Understanding traditional motifs requires cultural knowledge, as some patterns carry sacred or restricted meanings. The study highlights the need for ethical and respectful use of motifs, especially in commercial design, to avoid misusing culturally significant symbols. Traditional motifs can significantly enhance interior design by strengthening spatial identity, aesthetic value, and cultural storytelling. When used with cultural sensitivity, these motifs help preserve symbolic meanings and support cultural sustainability, ensuring that traditional heritage continues within contemporary design practices. Rek-Lipczyńska, A., & Kowalska, A. (2025), examine the emotional dimension of interior design, focusing on the integration of cultural and emotional elements in living spaces. This has shown that, in addition to the study of symbols and signs in design, the role of emotions also has an impact on interior design.

The findings show that textile motifs can be adapted into wall coverings, furniture and accessories without losing their cultural value. This adaptation enhances interior aesthetics, strengthens cultural identity, supports sustainability and boosts the local creative economy. The study offers innovative ways to integrate cultural heritage into modern design while ensuring its relevance and preservation.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that traditional textile motifs contain rich symbolic meanings that are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, social structure, and community identity. The interpretation of motifs through semiotic analysis reveals that the elements found in traditional textile patterns are not merely decorative, but function as symbolic representations of nature, spiritual beliefs, and cultural narratives transmitted from one generation to another. This supports the view that textile motifs serve as visual language, carrying implicit messages that reflect cultural values and philosophies. In this sense, motifs play a crucial role in communicating cultural identity and preserving collective memory within the community.

Furthermore, the study shows that traditional motifs have strong potential for meaningful application in interior design. When motifs are translated into spatial elements such as wall panels, textile coverings, decorative surfaces, and architectural accents they contribute to the creation of cultural ambience and enhance spatial identity. Symbolic motifs also offer opportunities for interior designers to incorporate local values into contemporary spaces, thereby supporting cultural continuity and elevating cultural appreciation. The integration of motifs into interior design presents new possibilities for culturally responsive design solutions that reflect the identity of a place and its people.

The discussion also reinforces the theoretical contribution of this research by integrating semiotic interpretation with interior design application. While past literature has extensively documented the symbolic meanings of traditional textile motifs, this study extends that knowledge by linking motif interpretation to practical design relevance. In doing so, the findings contribute to cultural sustainability in design discourse by showing how traditional knowledge can be preserved through design practice. This research therefore provides a conceptual framework for designers, scholars, and cultural practitioners in developing culturally informed interior environments grounded in heritage values.

Overall, the study emphasises that the use of traditional textile motifs in interior design must go beyond aesthetic appreciation. A culturally informed approach is necessary to ensure that motifs are applied responsibly, ethically, and meaningfully. When interpreted and applied correctly, traditional motifs have the potential to enrich interior environments through symbolic depth, cultural authenticity, and heritage-based design values. Ultimately, this study contributes to a broader discourse on cultural sustainability by showing how interior design can become a medium for preserving cultural identity while adapting to contemporary needs.

6.0 Recommendations

A recommendation for future research is to develop design application guidelines for designer to ensure that traditional textile motifs are applied responsibly and meaningfully in interior design. Firstly, designers should priorities a culturally informed design process by seeking accurate interpretation of motif symbolism before integrating them into interior spaces. This includes consulting cultural practitioners, artisans, or documented cultural sources to avoid misinterpretation and ensure that symbolic meanings are respected. Motifs with sacred or restricted significance should only be used with cultural approval, or alternatively excluded from commercial design applications.

Secondly, it is recommended that designers adopt a design approach that preserves the authenticity of motifs by maintaining key symbolic forms, compositional structure, and characteristic elements. While contemporary adaptations may be necessary for modern aesthetics, stylization should not distort symbolic meaning or diminish cultural identity. In addition, design application should consider appropriate scale, placement, and material suitability, particularly when motifs are used as feature elements within spatial surfaces. Motifs with dominant symbolic significance may be more suitable for focal areas, while subtler motifs may be incorporated in secondary surfaces such as textiles or furnishings.

Thirdly, interior design education and professional training should incorporate cultural literacy and awareness of traditional symbolism as part of design competency. This would equip designers with knowledge of cultural heritage and ethical design principles, ultimately promoting responsible and respectful use of traditional motifs. It is also recommended that designers adopt sustainable and ethically sourced materials to support local textile production and empower traditional weaving communities.

Finally, it is recommended that guidelines for motif usage be formally developed into practical design tools such as motif-application frameworks, visual catalogues, or motif design matrices that highlight cultural meanings, design suitability, and ethical considerations. Overall, the responsible application of traditional motifs is essential not only for aesthetic purposes but also for sustaining cultural identity and supporting cultural continuity within modern interior environments.

Acknowledgement

The authors share their sincere appreciation for the editors' helpful comments. The authors also wish to express their appreciation to the Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan Branch, Malaysia, for their assistance with this research. We might want to communicate our thankfulness to all the creators for their enlightening contributions and the commentators for their help and productive studies in making this exceptional issue conceivable.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research contributes to the field of sustainable art and design research.

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